

Research in Practice – ADAD5004

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Proposed question for Independent Inquiry: ‘How does an individual’s understanding of data collection affect their response to targeted advertising?’.

In this essay, I am going to critically discuss the techniques of modern advertising, paying close attention to the keyword's 'surveillance', 'targeted' and 'data'. These three elements are the core determining factors in developing successful advertisements in today's saturated climate and are all required in the process. However, there are many ethical issues and individual's ideologies that need to be considered, which will be the focus of this essay as I hope to develop an understanding of how differing attitudes to surveillance, data collection and targeted advertisements can impact the effectiveness of advertising. I will criticise various modern advertising campaigns that have had differing responses and will determine how best to interpret the ideologies of individuals.

The first keyword I will look at is 'surveillance'. Even though the Cambridge dictionary is not a source of philosophical truth, it is good to start with the lay person's understanding of the word. The dictionary defines this keyword as "the careful watching of a person or place" (SURVEILLANCE | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020). It is interesting to note the use of the word, careful. What does it mean here? Is it the idea of respecting the act of privacy of the person, or that it refers to the idea that each act of surveillance is carefully documented and saved? This conflict of meanings is why surveillance can be looked at in many ways. For example, Albrechtslund sees surveillance as being defined as "something potentially empowering, subjectivity building and even playful" with regards to participatory surveillance (Albrechtslund, 2008). Meanwhile, Fuchs and Trottier defines this keyword as "a monitoring of different social activities in different social roles" when looking at online social networking. (Fuchs and Trottier, 2015).

From these two definitions it is clear to see that Fuchs and Trottier sees the word in a much more literal way and links closely to the Cambridge dictionary definition. The words 'monitoring' and 'watching' are interchangeable and is what I would personally associate with this keyword. The definition from article 1 gives surveillance quite the opposite meaning to what you would normally associate with the word- describing it as 'empowering' and 'playful'. I think the most important factor that needs to be considered here is the type of surveillance it is in reference to- in this case 'participatory', which Cambridge dictionary defines as "allowing people to take part in or become involved in an activity" (PARTICIPATORY | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020).

This demonstrates that by giving people a choice and allowing them to choose whether they take part in being under surveillance, the outcome will vary greatly and can have much more positive impacts if agreed to. This is a really important factor with regards to surveillance in advertising. Obviously, for advertising to be successful, it needs to be welcomed by the audience, something that is unlikely to happen if the audience feel like they are being monitored without their consent. For surveillance to lead to positive targeted advertising, the monitoring needs to be agreed to, however a problem arises when this transparency is not made clear. Most websites now days will ask you to accept cookies, which essentially is them asking you for permission to monitor what you look at on the internet. Many agree to these cookies, unaware of what it actually means, or just in a bid to get rid of the pop-up so they can carry on browsing the internet, so then respond negatively to targeted advertising when

it appears elsewhere in their internet journey, as they aren't fully aware where this information has been gathered from. This leads me to ask the question, is transparency of **targeted** advertising a vital factor into acceptance of the advertisements?

An example of an advertisement that used **surveillance** to its advantage is shown in Figure 1 opposite. A billboard was set up as part of the promotions for Oliver Stone's Snowden movie, which focuses on the leaking of NSA's illegal **surveillance** techniques to the public. The billboard was set up to track "the movements of pedestrians in the immediate area", which were then "livestreamed to the motion tracking billboard" (McQuarrie, 2016). The stunt left people feeling uncomfortable and afraid of being watched by others, however this was the intent of this promotion, in order to cleverly link with the theme of the movie. This campaign used a weakness of **surveillance** advertising to its advantage- however does this just show that marketers know that the audience doesn't respond well to being watched, therefore proving the majority of other **surveillance** campaigns to be a waste of time?



Figure 1- Advertisement for Oliver Stone's Snowden movie (McQuarrie, 2016)

Another example of a **surveillance** advertising billboard can be seen in Figure 2. This campaign for Lexus singles out drivers in competitors' cars and designs a custom message to show a similar Lexus model to their own car, while reading, for example, "Hey white Audi driver, it's time to Crossover. This is the New Lexus NX." (McQuarrie, 2015). For the custom messages to be delivered, the billboard used "cameras on high rotation,



Figure 2- Advertisement for Lexus (McQuarrie, 2015)

which [sends] images to a database that automatically matches models, colour and other variables to the vehicles of Lexus' competitors". This campaign was generally responded to well, and was seen as an interesting, individual advertisement, despite the fact the audience is still under **surveillance**, being watched by many cameras, which begs the question- why would this campaign be responded to in a more positive way than the motion tracking billboard?

It could be due to the fact that the only information being made available for the wider public to see on the billboard is what they could already see on the road ahead of them, however similarly with the motion tracking billboard- you would be able to watch the actions of the person in front of you whether they were on a giant screen or not. Alternatively, the audiences could be less aware of the fact they are being watched by the Lexus ad. They don't know how the billboard works, so are unaware that there are multiple cameras watching them as they pass by- so is the acceptance of surveillance down to lack of understanding, or in contrast, perhaps ignorance of the truth?

I think that an audience's reaction to surveillance is completely down to both their attitude towards it, as well as their understanding of it. Some may find it is 'empowering', and others may feel they are being 'monitored', and with a lack of knowledge or understanding of how a billboard works, the audience may be opposed to the ads that are actually less targeted and don't require personal data.

This leads me on to the next two keywords I will discuss- targeted and data. Again, in order to interpret the average understanding of the word, Cambridge dictionary defines the word 'targeted' as "directed at a particular group or activity" (TARGETED | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020).

In the article 'A privacy-aware framework for targeted advertising' (Wang, Yang, Chen and Zhang, 2015), targeted advertising is defined as a "personalised ad", that is "catered to user's preference and interest". This article also recognises that the effectiveness of advertising "heavily depends on the relevance of advertisements" and that most of existing targeted advertising techniques requires access to users' info "to learn their traits", which obviously raises privacy concerns.

Likewise, GCF Global (The Now: What is Targeted Advertising?, 2020) define targeted advertising as advertising that "focuses on the specific traits, interests and preferences of a consumer", with this information being discovered through "tracking [consumers] activity".

Looking back at the Snowden and Lexus billboards, audiences generally felt more comfortable with the Lexus ad, but why? This billboard was more targeted to individuals, with more data collected compared to the Snowden billboard which was simply a camera livestreaming footage. Granted, if this footage was being saved it could be later used for other purposes and seems more personal as it is showing people's faces, but for this advertisement it was simply 'observing' the surroundings, without targeting any individual.

The Lexus ad on the other hand, used cameras to identify the cars make, model and colour- likely through a car registration database, to find similar cars in a Lexus model, (which therefore is probably going to match the taste of the driver) to formulate a targeted ad specifically calling out that driver, as it focused on the preferences of the consumer. If car registrations were used to determine the make and model, it is also likely that they would have known the registered drivers name- so could have possibly gone even further to target them with information such as their name, gender etc. But why was this advertisement, which is much more targeted to the individual,

received better than the Snowden billboard? This could be because it is something new, and with it being catered to the individual consumer it is more interesting and eye-catching, but I believe it is again mainly down to lack of understanding- and someone with more knowledge here may have different ideologies and therefore would see this differently.

A person's ideologies could also link to how the ads make them feel- specifically if they feel they are being watched, or if they are being looked at. To compare, Cambridge Dictionary defines 'Looked' as, "to direct your eyes in order to see" (LOOK | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020). while 'watch' is defined as "to look at something for a period of time, especially something that is changing or moving" (WATCH| meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020).

It could be a highly likely scenario that people respond to the Snowden ad as being 'watched', while they respond to the Lexus as being simply 'looked' at, as it feels somehow less permanent for the ad to recognise your car make/ model. Additionally, if we look back at the Cambridge dictionary definitions, technically the cars are not 'changing', therefore the Lexus ad does not fit the description of 'watching', whereas the Snowden ad is watching people move, so it has a greater link to this word. The Lexus billboard seems more 'fleeting', and less permanent as it changes with every passing car. Personally, the thought of being 'watched', compared to being 'looked' at is a lot more uncomfortable and intrusive, as it feels more purposeful- and well, targeted.

The final keyword I will look at is 'data' (with regards to data collection) which in my opinion is one of the most important factors in creating successful targeted advertisements. In the Cambridge Dictionary, 'data' is defined as, "information, especially facts or numbers, collected to be examined and considered and used to help decision-making" (DATA| meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020). Data can be easily linked to the previous keywords, as users are 'monitored' (surveillance) and their activity is 'tracked' (targeted) in order to collect the relevant data, showing that surveillance is required in order to collect the data, which is then used to compose targeted advertisements. Without the data being collected, the other keywords/ actions become unnecessary.

Before the rise of the internet, advertisers would target specific audiences by showing their ads on TV at certain times, publishing in newspapers their audiences would read, and putting up billboards in locations their audiences would likely see (Zawadzinski, n.d). Although these methods are still forms of targeting specific audiences using generic data, advertisers are now using the internet to access individuals user data to "get their message in front of the right person at the right time" (Zawadzinski, n.d).

Online activity is tracked on most webpages via cookies; however, some websites also use third-party scripts for tracking (known as trackers) and to display ads. When a website that uses trackers is accessed, information about the user is collected, such as browser language, web history, geolocation, profile data and online transactional history. This data is then sold on to data brokers, who process this data to compose segments

which are then used to target the relevant audiences. These segments may include relationship status, interests, age, gender, and ethnicity, (Zawadzinski, n.d).

Again, if we look back at the two billboard ads, the Lexus billboard requires a lot more data to be collected and processed in comparison to the Snowden billboard, in which no data is (seemingly) collected - even though this isn't through online activity, the principles are the same. So, what are the determining factors that encourage audiences' reactions and acceptance of data collection being used to target them as individuals, which is clearly done in the Lexus ad as individual drivers are called out.

This could be due to many factors, which I plan to critically explore in more detail. As previously stated, I think a major contributor to what is deemed acceptance of targeted advertisements is a lack of knowledge regarding what data can and is being collected, which is what I believe the reasoning behind the general acceptance of the Lexus billboard is, as it is a new form of advertising, people are unaware of how it works. For those that are aware of how data collection and processing works, I think the attitudes and responses to targeted advertising is down to their ideologies as an individual, and that there is likely to be a direct correlation between how open a person is through their online 'journey', and their acceptance and encouragement of these targeted ads.

In a study into why people may be willing or unwilling to share data, it was found that willingness was "not only based on the sensitivity of the information, but also on the scope of collection and use, perceived necessity of collection, and perceived benefits or harms of disclosing specific data types", (Leon, Rao, Schaub, Marsh, Cranor, Sadeh, 2015). In contrast to my previous assumptions, this could be an alternate reason to the general positive response to the Lexus billboard- the general data that is collected (car make and model), is unlikely to be perceived as sensitive information, with little

harm to come from the disclosure of this data.

Additionally, the audience may see this use of data collection to have a purpose, as it is directly showing them a car they are likely to be interested in so is more useful to them than generic ads. This presumption is supported by data from the study, shown in Figure 3, which shows that people are most willing to share data with advertisers so that they can receive relevant ads- in a current market saturated with new brands and products, consumers only want to see what is relevant to them so are willing for their data to be used to support this.

Reason	Count	Percent
Receive relevant ads	66	25.8%
Not personal/secret/private	48	18.8%
Does not matter	32	12.5%
Not personally identifiable	23	9.0%
Required to provide relevant service	18	7.0%
No harm in sharing	12	4.7%
Easy to infer	8	3.1%
Technical aid	7	2.7%
Not embarrassing	7	2.7%
Receive better deals	7	2.7%
Location targeting	7	2.7%
Not privacy invasive	6	2.3%
Other	14	5.5%

Figure 3- Reasons why participants are willing to share data with advertisers (Leon, Rao, Schaub, Marsh, Cranor, Sadeh, 2015)

I feel there could be a link here with the rise of influencer advertising- as people want content and ads that are relevant to them and are far more active on social media than ever before, marketers can easily target specific

groups of people at once by endorsing particular influencers to advertise their products. The audiences are in full control of choosing what content they see on social media, so this would likely promote positive engagement.

In order to collect first-hand **data**, I will design a survey to look further into the relationship of individuals online presence and interaction, with their acceptance of **targeted** advertising. I will look at other personal factors, such as age and gender, as I believe these will impact the results- with younger and likely male individuals being more open to **targeted** advertising. Additionally, I want to determine if a lack of understanding is responsible for reactions to advertisements, so I will test the knowledge of individuals.

Overall, It is clear that this essay has not explored the full range of ideas within this topic. This is due to differing individuals' ideologies that vary so greatly that more research is needed to even begin to discuss the effectiveness of **targeted** advertising. The next stage will be to explore a wider range of articles outside of this essay, which will generate potential questions for the survey I will design with a new focus on the essay question 'How does an individual's understanding of **data** collection affect their response to **targeted** advertising?'.

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